

Chancellor's Inaugural Address

Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

17 April 2018

Chairperson of Council, Ambassador January-Bardill

Premier of the Eastern Cape, Hon. Masualle

Executive Mayor of Nelson Mandela Bay, Cllr Trollip

Members of Council

Vice-Chancellor Professor Muthwa

Nkosi Zwelivelile Mandela and the accompanying delegation

Speaker of the Provincial Legislature, Hon. Kiviet

Director General of the Department of Higher Education and Training, Mr Qonde representing the Minister of Higher Education & Training, Hon. Pandor

Chancellors, Chairs of Council and Vice-Chancellors from sister universities and colleges and also those who have previously held office at this university

Deputy Vice-Chancellors

Executive management of the university

Members of the Student Representative Council

The professoriate, academics, staff and students

Honorary Doctorate recipients

University stakeholders from business, government, funders, civil society, the faith sector, and communities

Family members, friends and compatriots

And to all those around the country and the world who are watching the live-streaming on their devices

Good afternoon, molweni, goeie middag

## INTRODUCTION

I am deeply humbled by the confidence that the council, and community of Nelson Mandela University has shown in me, Nosipho January-Bardill and Sibongile Muthwa, to

lead this key institution, in the Home of Legends, at such a critical time for higher education and for our transformative, developmental nation. I am honored to form part of this trio of strong women.

Deeply humbled, with my revolutionary flag at half-mast following the loss of our Mother of the Nation, Mam uWinnie Madikizela. We have recently been left reeling by the passing on of a number of people who were leading contributors to the building of our democracy, such as Ambassador/Dr Zola Skweyiya, who although born in Cape Town was schooled in the Eastern Cape. These are just two of an extraordinary constellation of stars in whose hallowed footsteps we follow in this most inspirational, enigmatic and giving of provinces.

Think about it: From Sarah Baartman to Charlotte Maxeke and Albertina Sisulu (whose birth 100 years ago we commemorate this year), Olive Schreiner, Walter Sisulu, OR Tambo, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba, Joe Gqabi, Alfred Nzo, Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe, Chris Hani (assassinated in April, 25 years ago); Thabo Mbeki and Auntie Sophie Williams-De Bruyn (one of the leaders of the 1956 Women's March on Pretoria)... Which other region in the world can claim to have produced a list of icons and leaders of this stature?

Not to mention the most towering tree in the forest, our father and namesake, Nelson Mandela. Many years ago, as one of the younger members of his cabinet, I answered to him, and I must confess, today, I cannot help but to still feel accountable as I am installed as the Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University.

In 10 days time we will celebrate the 24th anniversary of uTata's, President Mandela's, installation as South Africa's first democratically elected, president mindful that our journey is just beginning. It is up to us to determine how high we will fly. Some turbulence will be unavoidable, but it cannot deter us from our path.

Where are we headed? We'll draw some of our inspiration from Africa's rich academic traditions that can be traced back to Egypt, Morocco and Mali during what Europe self-diagnosed as its medieval period. Fifty-five years ago, in defiance of the then-government's best efforts to stifle our African heritage, Nelson Mandela undertook an African re-connection odyssey, travelling through 16 countries including Tanzania,

Ethiopia, Algeria, Morocco, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Kenya – and then onto England before returning through Botswana. It was on this trip that our former President led an ANC delegation to the Pan African Freedom Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa (later to become the OAU) and he of course used it for much more. Distinct footsteps, again...

So, humbled, inspired, accountable and one more: resolute... I am resolute in my conviction that this university – our university – will soar from its rock-solid foundations to become a giant African-based edifice of intellectual inquiry and advancement... a transdisciplinary centre of excellence.

As the titular head, I look forward to work with Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa, a woman of the highest academic calibre and integrity, and Chairperson of Council, Ambassador Nozipho January-Bardill, another role-model. This is the only university to have a trio of women - strong women, unapologetically so – at the helm.

As Ngozi Chimamanda says: "I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and my femininity. And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be."

For me this appointment as Chancellor to the Nelson Mandela University is an immense honor, and an enormous responsibility, located in the Eastern Cape, where my late father was born – in Tsomo, in 1932. In a way, my appointment completes the circle back to the region of the country from which the Frasers hail and there are quite a few Frasers present here today - two of my siblings and a number of my cousins. He was a teacher, in mathematics, biology and science ( and he improvised creatively when he took us to catch frogs to dissect for his pupils in a lab that was inadequate) and as he looks down today - from his vantage point - I believe it will be with full approval and pride because education was important to him.

My mother, who is with us here today, was born in Klipfontein, Cape Town, and as with so many South African working class families had along with her two younger sisters to leave school at an early age ( first alternating the weeks when they attended school, to ensure that her younger siblings complete their schooling/education. Proudly, we can

declare that her youngest two siblings went on to become a professor in literature and a psychologist. Mummy, it is a long road from the days when you and Uncle Mervyn (who is also present today), walked the dusty streets of Klipfontein - in the 1940's and 50's - selling Christmas stamps to workers along with *The Guardian*, *The New Age* followed by *the Spark* (the names changed every time the then regime banned the newspaper) - a left wing publication founded by trade unions, academics and others.

Education was important, and at that stage of our country's history some had to sacrifice for others to study. We must fully remedy the whole issue of access to education and knowledge.

From my parents and my grandparents I learned that education is not only about the academic learning but also about political, economic and social justice, as best described by Richard Shaull in the foreword to Paulo Freire's seminal work on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He wrote: "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

I am very proud to be my parents' progeny. Wole Soyinka said, "You cannot live a normal existence if you haven't taken care of a problem that affects your life and affects the lives of others, values that you hold which in fact define your very existence."

Jabu Moleketi, my husband, and I have sought to impart these values to our children and the many children for whom we have taken responsibility. And, we have emphasized the need for knowledge of our history...

## THE FALLACY OF THE DARK CONTINENT

In 1963, the renowned British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, in a lecture at the University of Sussex, infamously said: "It is fashionable to speak today as if European history were devalued: as if historians, in the past, have paid too much attention to it; and as if, nowadays, we should pay less. Undergraduates, seduced, as always, by the changing

breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.”

Harold Perkin in his, “History of Universities”, published in the Springer International Handbook of Higher Education, sought to distinguish the corporatized structure of “universities” established in Europe in the 13th century from the rest of the world’s educational endeavours. The Confucian schools for the mandarin bureaucracy of imperial China, the Hindu gurukulas and Buddhist vihares for the priests and monks of medieval India, the madrasas for the mullahs and Quranic judges of Islam, the Aztec and Inca temple schools for the priestly astronomers of pre-Columbian America, the Tokugawa han schools for Japanese samurai... They all “taught the high culture, received doctrine, literary and/or mathematical skills of their political or religious masters, with little room for questioning or analysis”.

*We’ll return to received doctrine later...*

*There is an old Tamashek proverb that says: Riverboats come from the South, Salt camels come from the North, Wisdom & Knowledge reside in Timbuktu.*

Perkin, however, cites no references to ancient African educational structures. They don't exist in his history.

*“African knowledge was not only passed down orally.*

*The notion that ancient African education was oral and not written is only a myth. In his book, “Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora,” Dr Michael Gomez, an author and professor of history and Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at New York University, declares that, from 300 B.C. to A.D. 350, the Meroë civilization had developed a writing system of its own.”*

- The Alexandrian academy and its famous library, were founded in Egypt in 331BC, attracting the most eminent mathematicians of the timesuch as Euclid and Archimedes;

- The Al-Quarawiyyin University was established in Fez, Morocco, in 859AD, and its founder was a woman, *Fatima al-Fihri*. It is the oldest existing, continually operating and the first degree-awarding educational institution in the world;
- Al-Azhar University was founded in Cairo, Egypt, in 970AD, offering its students studies of the Qur'an and Islamic law, along with logic, grammar, rhetoric, and how to calculate the lunar phases of the moon; and
- The University of Timbuktu or University of Sankore was established around 1100 AD, built with funding from a wealthy Mandinka woman. It became a world-famous centre of learning. At one point, it has an enrolment of approximately 25 000 students from Africa and the Mediterranean.

A recent archaeological survey conducted by Yale academics between 2008 and 2010 confirmed that Timbuktu's antiquity extends beyond its 12th century AD Tuareg origins, with permanent large-scale urban settlements beginning as early as 200 BC. The researchers also concluded that Timbuktu was already participating in trans-Saharan trade by 500 AD.

Describing his experience of the city in 1526, Leo Africanus wrote: "There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many hand-written books imported from Barbary are also sold. There is more profit made from this commerce than from all other merchandise."

Under the Songhai empire, the city became a great Muslim educational centre, with more than 180 Quranic schools and universities. By the end of Mansa Musa's reign (early in the 14th century), the Sankoré mosque, also known as the University of Sankoré, was established – a contemporary of Oxford and the Sorbonne.

Its scholars included the legendary Ahmed Baba (1564-1627), the final chancellor of Sankoré University before the Moroccan invasion in 1593. He wrote scores of books spanning law, medicine, philosophy, astronomy and mathematics. Described, as a matchless jurist, professor, and Imam of his time

Baba, known among his peers as, “The Unique Pearl of his Time” was exiled to Morocco. The historian, Felix Dubois, tells us in *Timbuctoo the Mysterious* that Baba’s “renown increased in Morocco and became universal, spreading from Marrakesh to Bougie, Tunis and even to Tripoli. The Arabs of the north called this African ‘very learned and very magnanimous,’ and his gaolers found him ‘a fount of erudition”.

*Kwame Nkrumah, speaking at his installation as the first chancellor of the University of Ghana in 1961, lamented: “If the University of Sankore had not been destroyed; if Professor Ahmed Baba, author of forty historical works, had not had his works and his university destroyed; if the University of Sankore as it was in 1591 had survived the ravage of foreign invasions; the academic and cultural history of Africa might have been different from what it is today.”*

The dark continent, indeed!

## DECOLONISING EDUCATION

Debating the meaning of decolonisation in the context of higher education, on BBC Radio 4 in February, Dr Meera Sabaratnam, Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies characterised university education as ‘challenging received wisdom’.

Responding to Dr Sabaratnam, senior lecturers in International Relations at Department of Social Sciences at Oxford Brookes University, Maia Pal and Doerthe Rosenow, ask: “Isn’t ‘decolonising’ just assessing that knowledge was made and transmitted by white European men?”

“A lot more started to be known about the world from about the same time as when these men went to ‘make contact’ with the rest of the world by pillaging, spreading diseases, fighting, negotiating, abducting, deceiving, robbing, raping, enslaving, and killing others,” they continue.

“And obviously, to be able to share the experiences of this ‘contact’, it was needed to bring some of these people back to the European continent, and put them on display for the sake of the public interest (as Sarah Baartman was). Specimens of their bodies, of their houses, of their land, of their minds were needed because one can’t acquire more knowledge without possessing it, right?”

Mahmood Mamdani, once at UCT and now attached to Uganda’s Makerere University and Columbia University in the US, is considered one of the leading post-colonial thinkers on decolonising education. Asked on a return visit to UCT in 2017 what it practically meant to decolonise education, he responded with an example of his pedagogical approach at Makerere.

He requires his PhD students to identify a colonial text regarded as a key reference point by Western academics. The students are then challenged to understand the language of the people referred to in the text, and are not allowed to graduate unless they have research proficiency in two other languages besides English. Finally, he asks his students to analyse and describe the author’s assumptions on what information is relevant.

“What categories is he/she utilising to validate certain information and invalidate other information? And then I say to them, ‘now you use the same information and give me a different narrative than the author’. That’s decolonisation,” he said.

“We do not want to be slaves,” Ghanaian language expert Professor Kwesi Prah said in a paper presented at the University of Botswana in 2009, “neither do we want to compete with Shakespeare in his own language. We cannot profitably do this. If we try to do this, we will be perpetual second-rate Englishmen, not Africans; Walter Bagehot’s ‘unfit men and beaten races’.”

Singapore-based academic, Dr Meng-Hsuan Chou, co-editor of the publication, *Building the Knowledge Economy in Europe: New Constellations in European Research and Higher Education Governance*, drew interesting comparisons between knowledge policies based on her experience of having worked in North America, Europe and Asia.



In the United States the subject was slightly tilted towards the context of how knowledge could be used to advance society's wellbeing. Europe was more focussed on solving "grand challenges" and the role of science in policy-making, while Asia's focus was on how knowledge could be used to increase national overall economic competitiveness. Chou stressed that these distinctions were very subtle.

"What I find surprising," she wrote, "is that there are less talks about the role of higher education in 'citizen making'. Indeed, it appears as if overnight we all became global citizens, moving seamlessly around the world, which is simply not true."

So where should our focus lie, as a nation, as a higher education sector – and closer to home – at the Nelson Mandela University?

#### ACCELERATING TRANSFORMATION

Our namesake, uTata ( President Nelson Mandela), described racism as, "a blight on the human conscience". He said: "The idea that any people can be inferior to another, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define & treat the rest as subhuman, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of gods".

Many years later, just last month, in fact, a White woman became the first South African to be sentenced to a prison term for the use of racist language of a nature reminiscent of the worst periods of our past. The sad reality, we all know, is that Vicky Momberg is by no means the last bigot in our midst.

But it's not just the bigotry that should alarm us; it's the affliction of entitlement to continue enjoying the best resources our country has to offer – to the continued exclusion of the overwhelming majority of citizens – that is of greater concern.

*Non-racialism is a key principle of the Freedom Charter, our Constitution and university. This principle should not be confused with colour-blindness, the post-race society, or the expunction of differentiated racial experiences. Rather, it should be understood as a relentless, incessant, principle that animates our work against racism, in a decidedly racist and racialized society; and world.*

If we fail to accelerate, comprehensively, addressing apartheid power relations in our land – socially, psychologically, educationally and economically – we render non-racialism vulnerable and run the risk of threatening the realization of a transformative developmental state, besides failing the legends in whose footsteps we tread. Our universities have a critical role to play in this regard. Now is not the time for anger or aggression; as an institution we must grasp the opportunities that real transformation presents.

One of the challenges we face is a public discourse that sometimes reflects transformation as only partially desirable. Let's be very clear about this: Transformation is not about charity; it does not equate to a lowering of standards, corruption, or the punishment or exclusion of any particular group. It does not infer inferiority or a lowering of standards, but superiority, progress and sustainability. It is a process we must engage, and we must emerge fairer, more compassionate, and with a greater sense of pride, equity and justice when we are done. It is not just desirable; it is a necessity.

Maintaining the status quo – be it economically, in the ownership of land, the demographics of our institutions, or opportunities for our children – is tantamount to booby-trapping our nation's future, besides betraying the principles of our legendary elders and the anti-apartheid struggle.

The transformation required of our universities straddles every aspect of their existence, from admission policies, fields of study and curricula, to pedagogical approaches, the demographics of staff and student bodies, and the quality of their output.

We must confront the issue of gender and feminism as well. As the Nelson Mandela University can we associate ourselves with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who said: "My own definition as a feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better. All of us, women and men, must do better."

In the words of our Dr Pumla Dineo Gqola, “While there are many feminist strands, which is to say different kinds of feminism, there are also many core principles. The commitment to actively oppose and end patriarchy is one. The recognition that patriarchy works like other systems of oppression, like racism and capitalism, to value some people and brutalise others is another area of agreement. Like other systems of oppression, it also requires the support of many members of the groups it oppresses.”

Changes to our race and gender policies and attitudes are part of the re-balancing and reinvention act that we must address pragmatically and fearlessly as it’s about securing a collective future.

By way of examples, we would like to develop a higher proportion of Black, and women, post-graduate students at Nelson Mandela University without reducing the number of White, or male, post-grads.

And we’d, for example, like more of them to be entering the auditing profession, and contributing to the development of a new global and national environment of ethical governance – to span both the public and private sectors.

#### NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY IS ON THE RUNWAY

Nelson Mandela University is very well positioned to lead the development of new knowledge and reduce dependencies on received doctrine. This reflects the work of my predecessors at the then-Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Chief Justice Pius Langa and, most recently, Santie Botha, who were highly committed to this institution. They laid strong foundations on which I intend to build.

We have a bold and distinctive footprint, nationally and globally, in trans-disciplinary endeavours including the ocean sciences, where our work is regarded as pioneering. By contributing as we are to radically deepening understanding of sustainability, across the broad spectrum of natural sciences, we advance democracy and social justice.

As Professor Derrick Swartz, our former Vice-Chancellor succinctly put it: “The research we do is an important tool to help governments, industries and communities to make decisions in an informed, socially and environmentally sustainable manner.”

Flying the flag for Nelson Mandela, in our values and principles, comes with massive natural advantages, too. By embracing diverse knowledge and traditions, and humanising pedagogical approaches, we stimulate a vibrant intellectual culture deeply embedded in our roots and culture. We are reconnecting to Africa, following a similar path to that of our namesake across the continent in 1962, and then on to England and across the globe.

I think we can pat ourselves on the back for both an exceptional body of students and an exceptional enrolment value chain enhancing student access and nurturing success. Through curricula and co-curricular interventions we become the citizen-makers we aspire to be, developing graduates as responsible and democratic human beings who contribute to addressing global challenges in innovative and trans-disciplinary ways... citizens who contribute to our country and our changing world.

“The power of education,” Nelson Mandela said, “extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It can contribute to nation building and reconciliation. Our previous system emphasized the physical and other differences of South Africans with devastating effects. We are steadily but surely introducing education that enables our children to exploit their similarities and common goals, while appreciating the strength in their diversity.”